

**PERIPHERAL BY DESIGN? DEPENDENCY, COMPRADOR
STATECRAFT, AND NIGERIA'S DEVELOPMENTAL REVERSAL
UNDER THE BUHARI ADMINISTRATION (2015–2023)**

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ABSTRACT: This study examines Nigeria's comprehensive decline under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) through an integrated theoretical framework synthesizing dependency theory and the comprador state concept. The central research question asks: to what extent can the Buhari-era reversal across economic, educational, and security domains be understood as a structurally functional outcome of Nigeria's peripheral position in the global capitalist system, rather than merely governance failure? The analysis employs a qualitative explanatory case study design, contrasting the Jonathan-era trajectory (2011–2015), when Nigeria achieved Africa's largest economy status with an average growth rate of 7%, with the Buhari-era reversal documented in World Bank, IMF, and national statistics. Findings reveal that by 2023, per capita income had regressed to 1980s levels, education budgets fell below 6% of federal expenditure with 663 days of university strikes, and insecurity expanded from north-eastern containment to nationwide crisis. According to Bergstresser (2021), civilian fatalities exceeded 13,000 annually during this period. The study demonstrates that Western diplomatic and financial support correlated inversely with developmental outcomes: the growth-oriented Jonathan administration faced critical distancing, while the declining Buhari regime received sustained backing. This paradox, the study argues, can be understood through comprador theory: a weakened, indebted Nigeria served external interests by remaining a compliant peripheral state rather than emerging as a sovereign competitor. The article concludes by briefly noting, as an illustrative coda, that the Tinubu administration's pursuit of strategic autonomy—BRICS partnership, currency diversification, and Chinese mineral processing agreements—has provoked Western hostility, a pattern that tentatively confirms the study's core theoretical expectation that the geopolitical imperative for external actors remains containment rather than development.

Keywords: Nigeria, Dependency Theory, Comprador State, Geopolitical Economy, Underdevelopment, Buhari Administration

INTRODUCTION

The assertion that Nigeria's decline under President Muhammadu Buhari (2015–2023) can be understood as a structurally functional outcome of peripheral capitalist integration, rather than mere governance failure, finds support in both quantitative evidence and qualitative analysis. This study advances the thesis that the comprehensive reversal across economic, educational, and security

domains may be understood as serving to maintain Nigeria's subordinate position in the global hierarchy.

The empirical foundation for this argument rests on a stark contrast between two presidential tenures. Under Goodluck Jonathan (2011–2015), Nigeria experienced what the World Bank (2014) acknowledged as significant economic gains, with the nation declared Africa's largest economy in 2013 following GDP rebasing. The economy averaged 7% growth from 2001 to 2014, ranking among the top 15 fastest-growing economies globally (World Bank, 2022). Inflation remained contained within single digits, the naira traded at predictable rates, and Nigeria secured election to the United Nations Security Council twice.

The 2015 election disrupted this trajectory decisively. By 2023, the World Bank (2022) confirmed that "income gains from 2000–2014 were partially reversed," with GDP per capita contracting to 1980s levels. Inflation had soared to 22.2%, public debt ballooned from ₦12.1 trillion to over ₦87 trillion, and the number of out-of-school children reached 20 million—the world's highest (Debt Management Office, 2023; UNESCO, 2022). Yet throughout this period of documented decline, Western powers maintained unwavering political and military support for Buhari (Ploch, 2015).

This paradoxical pattern—sustained Western support for an administration presiding over comprehensive decline—demands theoretical explanation. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: to what extent can Buhari's eight-year record be understood as a structurally functional outcome of Nigeria's peripheral position in the global capitalist system, specifically serving to prevent the nation from emerging as a geopolitical competitor?

The article is divided into five sections. Following this introduction, section two presents the integrated theoretical framework synthesizing dependency theory and the comprador state concept. Section three details the methodology, including case selection justification, counterfactual reasoning, and process tracing procedures. Section four constitutes the core analysis, examining the Jonathan-era baseline, the mechanisms of the 2015 transition, and comparative evidence across economic, educational, and security sectors. Section five concludes with a discussion of theoretical implications and directions for future research.

Theoretical Framework: Dependency and the Comprador State

This study advances an integrated theoretical framework synthesizing dependency theory and the comprador state concept to analyse Nigeria's developmental reversal. Rather than treating these theories sequentially, the framework deploys them as complementary analytical lenses: dependency theory elucidates the structural imperative of global capital to contain rising peripheral competitors, while the comprador state concept identifies the domestic mechanism through which this containment is operationalized via elite intermediation.

Dependency theory conceptualizes the relationship between developed "core" and underdeveloped "periphery" not as evolutionary stages but as conditioned subordination. Dos Santos (1970, p. 231) defines dependence as "a situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others." This conditioning operates through multiple

mechanisms: unequal exchange in international trade, technological dependency, debt-based financial integration, and the reproduction of economic structures oriented toward external rather than internal needs.

Amin (2019) extends this analysis by theorizing “delinking” as the necessary condition for autonomous development. His framework emphasizes that peripheral economies are characterized by disarticulation—the absence of organic connections between sectors producing for domestic consumption and those integrated into global markets. This structural feature ensures that growth in export enclaves fails to generate broad-based development, while external shocks are transmitted rapidly throughout the domestic economy.

Scholars of the African political economy have further refined these dynamics. Mkandawire’s (2001) work on the developmental state in Africa challenges the notion that peripheral status is immutable, demonstrating that post-independence states in Africa achieved significant industrialization when they possessed autonomous policymaking capacity. Conversely, Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2018) framework of coloniality emphasizes how power structures persist beyond formal colonialism, shaping knowledge production, political economy, and subjectivity in ways that reproduce peripheral status. Coker, Omenka, and Obo (2013) further demonstrate that “the Nigerian political economy is largely a discontinuous, disarticulate, astructural, rentier one which is dependent on the global capitalist system for its persistence and reproduction.” Their analysis confirms that “public policy output orientations were fundamentally the expression of the interest of the Western capitalist class as effectively represented by their comprador local or indigenous counterparts” (Coker et al., 2013, p. 1704). These perspectives suggest that Nigeria’s developmental reversal under Buhari may reflect not simply economic pressures but deeper epistemic and political structures that condition elite behaviour.

The Jonathan-era trajectory (2011–2015) represents what Cardoso and Faletto (1979) term “associated-dependent development”—a phase in which peripheral economies experience growth while remaining structurally subordinate. Nigeria’s 7% average growth, attainment of Africa’s largest economy status, and increased diplomatic visibility could be interpreted as threatening to transition from associated dependency toward genuine autonomy, potentially disrupting the structural relationship between core capital and peripheral resource extraction.

Dependency theory alone risks economic determinism by understating how domestic elites actively facilitate external domination. Here, the comprador state concept provides the necessary corrective. The term “comprador” derives from the Portuguese comprador (buyer), originally referring to indigenous intermediaries in colonial trading posts. In contemporary political economy, it denotes local elites whose material interests align with foreign capital rather than national development.

Turner (1980, p. 199) defines the comprador state formation as one wherein local elites “organize the access of foreign firms to local markets and raw materials” in exchange for political protection and material benefits. These elites function as intermediaries who manage national decline in service of external interests, receiving rents from continued peripheral integration while the costs of underdevelopment are borne by subordinate classes.

Coker et al (2013) provide empirical substantiation of this dynamic in Nigeria, demonstrating that “the nature of foreign investment is such that it promotes the interest of the Western capitalist economy” and that “the neocolonial policy orientation of the Nigerian state tended to produce and reproduce a dependent political economy.” Their analysis reveals a consistent pattern across decades: Nigerian policy elites have structured economic engagement to facilitate extraction and debt dependency rather than industrialization and autonomous development.

Recent scholarship has extended this concept to analyse contemporary resource extraction regimes, demonstrating that comprador dynamics persist in modified form under conditions of financialized capitalism (Adekola, 2023).

The integrated framework operates at two analytical levels. At the structural level, dependency theory explains why core powers have material interests in preventing the emergence of autonomous peripheral competitors. A Nigeria that had sustained its pre-2015 growth trajectory, diversified its economy, developed its educational infrastructure, and contained insecurity would represent a significant geopolitical challenge—capable of asserting regional hegemony, demanding reformed global governance institutions, and pursuing independent foreign policy.

At the agentic level, the comprador state concept explains how this structural imperative may be operationalized through domestic elite intermediation. The Buhari administration’s policy choices—sustained underfunding of education despite campaign promises, selective allocation of security resources that failed to contain insurgency, accumulation of unsustainable debt from Western financial institutions—become intelligible when understood as potentially serving comprador interests. These policies ensured Nigeria remained a “debt-servicing machine” rather than a developmental state, focused on internal crisis management rather than external strategic competition.

The framework generates specific empirical expectations. First, Western engagement with Nigerian administrations should correlate inversely with developmental performance: growth-oriented administrations pursuing autonomy should face critical distancing, while declining administrations maintaining peripheral integration should receive sustained support. Second, comprador administrations should demonstrate selective administrative capacity—effectiveness in domains serving external interests (debt service, security cooperation, resource extraction) combined with failure in domains serving national development (education, economic diversification, poverty reduction). Third, genuine moves toward strategic autonomy should provoke Western hostility, suggesting that containment rather than development remains the geopolitical imperative.

This framework requires acknowledgement of its limitations. First, it struggles to empirically verify deliberate Western intent versus structural outcome—the evidence typically documents patterns consistent with comprador functionality rather than conscious conspiracy. Second, it may overestimate elite coherence by treating the state as a unified comprador formation rather than a site of factional contestation (Adekola, 2023). Third, it must account for exogenous factors—oil price shocks, regional security dynamics, global economic conditions—that condition but do not determine domestic outcomes. The analysis addresses these limitations by framing the argument in

terms of structural functionality rather than deliberate design, acknowledging intra-elite competition, and systematically assessing alternative explanations.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative explanatory case study design within the critical political economy paradigm (Yin, 2018). The Buhari administration (2015–2023) constitutes the primary case, selected through “crucial case” logic: if the comprador framework can explain the pattern of sustained Western support for an administration presiding over comprehensive decline, it provides strong confirmation for the theory (Gerring, 2007). The Jonathan administration (2011–2015) serves as a comparative counterfactual baseline, enabling analysis of the structural break in Nigeria’s developmental trajectory.

Nigeria represents a “most likely” case for comprador analysis given its historical integration into global capitalist structures, its status as Africa’s largest oil exporter, and its long-standing security and diplomatic relationships with Western powers. If comprador dynamics are not observable in Nigeria, they are unlikely to be observable elsewhere. Conversely, the successful demonstration of comprador functionality in the Nigerian case provides strong theoretical confirmation.

The Buhari administration was selected because it exhibited the paradoxical pattern motivating this inquiry: sustained Western support despite comprehensive governance failure across multiple domains. The Jonathan administration provides analytical leverage as a contrast case exhibiting the opposite pattern: growth-oriented policies that provoked Western distancing.

The counterfactual claim that Jonathan-era growth would have continued absent the 2015 transition requires careful methodological specification. Following Tetlock and Belkin (1996), the analysis employs three criteria for counterfactual validity: (1) historical consistency—the counterfactual must be plausible given pre-2015 conditions; (2) theoretical consistency—it must align with established economic relationships; (3) minimal rewrite—it must alter only the political transition while holding other factors constant where possible.

The analysis acknowledges exogenous factors that changed between 2014 and 2015, particularly the oil price collapse from over \$100/barrel to below \$30/barrel. The counterfactual claim is not that growth would have continued at 7% regardless, but that the policy response to exogenous shocks would have differed under a continuation of Jonathan-era economic management versus the actual Buhari-era policy reversal. The World Bank’s (2022) attribution of the reversal to “inconsistent macroeconomic policies” and “reversed reforms” provides institutional support for this counterfactual logic.

The study relies on multiple data sources triangulated to enhance construct validity:

Institutional reports: World Bank Nigeria Development Updates (2014, 2022, 2023), IMF Article IV consultations (2023), National Bureau of Statistics data (2014, 2015, 2023), Debt Management Office records (2023), UNESCO education reports (2022).

Media texts: Comparative analysis of Western and Nigerian media coverage of the 2015 election, drawing on Awobamise and Aderibigbe (2015).

Insider testimonies: Statements and memoirs by political elites, including former President Goodluck Jonathan (2018), Senator Aminu Waziri Tambuwal (2026) and House of Representatives member Ahmed Jaha (TheCable, 2024). These sources are analysed as primary political discourse rather than objective evidence, with systematic attention to each speaker's strategic self-presentation, political position at the time of the statement, and institutional incentives. Where testimonies align with documented events or other independent sources, they are treated as corroborating illustrations rather than definitive proof.

Academic scholarship: Peer-reviewed analyses including Egbe (2022), Bergstresser (2021), Salawu et al. (2025), and Mkandawire (2001).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as an informing logic for the study's approach to media texts, following Van Dijk (1998). Rather than conducting original discourse analysis, the study draws on the findings of Awobamise and Aderibigbe (2015) to illustrate how media framing may function as geopolitical conditioning. The analysis employs CDA concepts—metaphor, presupposition, topicalization—to interpret these existing findings within the study's theoretical framework.

Process tracing serves as an informing logic for organizing the empirical analysis, following George and Bennett (2005). Rather than formally applying the four evidentiary tests (straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking gun, doubly decisive), the analysis maps the causal chain linking Western diplomatic intervention in 2015 to subsequent patterns of support, using the logic of process tracing to structure the presentation of evidence.

Comparative historical analysis across economic, educational, and security sectors establishes the comprehensiveness of reversal and enables assessment of alternative explanations.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. First, reliance on secondary sources limits access to classified diplomatic communications; the study addresses this by triangulating multiple public sources and treating claims about Western intent with appropriate caution. Second, the critical theoretical stance risks confirmation bias; mitigation includes explicit engagement with alternative explanations and transparent presentation of disconfirming evidence. Third, insider testimonies reflect strategic interests rather than objective facts; analysis contextualizes each testimony within the speaker's political position and incentives.

The Lost Trajectory: Jonathan's Nigeria as Counterfactual Baseline

The empirical evidence for economic reversal is robust and well-documented in institutional reports. Under President Goodluck Jonathan, Nigeria experienced what the World Bank (2014) characterized as significant economic gains. The World Bank's Nigeria Poverty Assessment (2022) confirmed that between 2001 and 2014, Nigeria was "a rising star in West Africa, with an average

growth rate of seven per cent per year, and it ranked among the top 15 fastest-growing economies in the world.”

The 2013 GDP rebasing exercise, conducted by the National Bureau of Statistics, revealed “a larger, more diversified, and complex economy in Nigeria than was hitherto reported, with significant contributions to growth coming from manufacturing and some services not captured in previous data” (World Bank, 2014; NBS, 2014). This exercise officially positioned Nigeria as the largest economy in Africa, with a revised GDP of \$510 billion.

In the education sector, the Jonathan administration established 14 new federal universities in two years and institutionalized the Almajiri System of Education to integrate neglected children in the North into formal schooling (Nnaike, 2023). While security challenges existed—notably the 2014 Chibok abduction—the insurgency remained largely contained within the Northeast geopolitical zone (Bergstresser, 2021).

This trajectory suggested Nigeria was gradually asserting greater autonomy, a development that, from a dependency perspective, threatened the structural relationship between core Western economies and peripheral resource exporters (Amin, 2019). The subsequent reversal under Buhari must be understood against this counterfactual baseline: what Nigeria might have achieved had the 2015 transition not occurred.

The portrayal of Buhari’s governance as characterized by ineptitude has been extensively documented. Nurudeen (2025) characterizes his leadership style as “conservative” and marked by “sluggish decision-making.” However, Ogbonna and Aliu (2025) provide a critical examination of how such narratives are constructed, demonstrating that “Nigerian socio-political actors, like their global counterparts, do not present realities in public discourse but reproduce their personal/group ideologies.”

Several strands of evidence challenge the characterization of Buhari’s governance as merely incompetent. First, policy implementation demonstrates selectivity rather than incapacity. Salawu et al. (2025) show that defence spending rose dramatically under Buhari—from ₦968 billion in 2015 to over ₦2.98 trillion by 2023—indicating administrative capacity to prioritize certain areas.

Second, the administration demonstrated capacity in high-visibility infrastructure projects. Nurudeen (2025) acknowledges that under Buhari, “Projects like the Second Niger Bridge, Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, and revival of the long-abandoned rail transportation system” proceeded with substantial investment of approximately ₦10.5 trillion between 2016 and 2023.

Third, Usamotu and Kareem (2023) demonstrate that the administration “accessed foreign aids and grants majorly through international financial institutions and developed Western countries” but “misused foreign aids,” negatively impacting economic growth. This suggests not incapacity to secure financing, but a specific utilization pattern deepening debt dependency.

The “Civilian Coup” Mechanism: Western Intervention in 2015

The most direct scholarly treatment of Western intervention in Nigeria’s 2015 election comes from Egbe (2022), who concludes that “the outcome of the 2015 presidential election in Nigeria was strongly influenced by Washington DC and fellow world capitals in London and Paris, among others.” Egbe argues that “silent Western votes”—manifested through diplomatic pressure, media narratives, and selective threat of sanctions—effectively tilted the scales.

The media dimension is systematically analysed by Awobamise and Aderibigbe (2015), who demonstrate systematic divergence in how Western and Nigerian media framed Jonathan’s re-election declaration: “The ideology and personal perception of the writers is reflected clearly in the way the news articles are written.” Western outlets utilized genuine domestic crises to construct a “negative other-presentation” of the incumbent, implicitly positioning the opposition as preferable.

Former President Goodluck Jonathan’s memoir provides a first-hand account of the transition, characterising the 2015 election as a “civilian coup” enabled by Western powers acting “in active connivance” with domestic political elites (Jonathan, 2018, p. 47). While such testimony reflects a displaced political actor’s perspective and should be treated as stakeholder discourse rather than independent evidence, it aligns with other accounts of significant external involvement in the electoral outcome.

Senator Aminu Waziri Tambuwal, Speaker of the House during the transition, provided direct confirmation: “From even our recent history, the intervention of the international community shaped the election of 2015, which the APC benefited from” (Tambuwal, 2026). This testimony, from a central participant, moves the discussion from conjecture to a documented account from a central political participant.

Contrasting Trajectories: Economic, Educational, and Security Dimensions

The economic contrast between administrations is stark. Under Jonathan, GDP averaged 6–8% growth. The World Bank (2022) documented that this trend “ended abruptly in 2015” as macroeconomic reforms were reversed. GDP collapsed to an average of 1.1% between 2015 and 2021, below the population growth of 2.6%.

By 2023, the World Bank confirmed that “at the end of 2021, Nigeria’s real per capita income had fallen to its level in the 1980s” (World Bank, 2022). The bank projected “it would take roughly a decade for Nigeria to return to the level of GDP per capita seen in 2014.”

Inflation under Jonathan averaged 8.5% in 2013; by 2023, it soared to 22.41% (NBS, 2023). Exchange rate stability collapsed, with the naira trading at approximately ₦197/\$1 under Jonathan, deteriorating to multiple exchange rates exceeding ₦760/\$1 on parallel markets by 2023.

Public debt expanded from approximately ₦12.60 trillion in June 2015 to ₦87.38 trillion by December 2023 (Debt Management Office, 2023). Debt servicing consumed approximately 96.3% of government revenue by 2022, leaving minimal fiscal space for development (World Bank, 2023).

The World Bank's October 2025 Nigeria Development Update revealed the enduring consequences: the number of poor Nigerians rose from 81 million (40%) in 2019 to 139 million (61%) in 2025, with projections reaching 141 million (62%) in 2026 (World Bank, 2025). Average consumption fell by 6.7% between 2019 and 2023.

Crucially, the World Bank's (2025) CPI-FP index tracking the eight food items most consumed by the poor showed cumulative inflation of 406% between 2019 and 2024—more than double general food inflation (201%) and two-and-a-half times headline inflation (161%). For the poorest 10% of households, spending up to 70% of income on food, this represents an acute socio-economic challenge (Watkins et al, 2024).

The education sector reveals a stark comparison. Under Jonathan, policy orientation emphasized expansion of access through 14 new federal universities and the Almajiri system (Nnaike, 2023). By contrast, the Buhari tenure systematically underfunded education despite campaign promises.

Education budgets declined from 10.7% of federal expenditure in 2015 (₦484.2 billion) to 5.39% in 2022 (₦923.79 billion out of ₦17.13 trillion) and 5.3% in 2023—far below UNESCO's recommended 26% for developing nations (Nairametrics, 2025). Despite a 2021 pledge at the Global Education Summit to increase education spending by 50% over two years and up to 100% by 2025, allocations declined as a percentage of total expenditure.

The TETFund paradox illustrates selective capacity: the administration disbursed N1.702 trillion to tertiary institutions between 2015 and 2023, surpassing the N1.249 trillion disbursed in the fund's first two decades combined (1993–2014) (Nairametrics, 2025). Yet this infrastructure investment coincided with operational dysfunction as the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) spent 663 days on strike—nearly two full academic years lost (Nairametrics, 2025; ICIR, 2025). The 272-day strike in 2020 and the eight-month strike in 2022 represent the longest industrial actions in Nigerian history.

The human capital consequences were significant. The Chairman of ASUU at UNILAG revealed that 70% of the institution's best lecturers resigned during this period (Nnaike, 2023). The “Japa” phenomenon accelerated dramatically, with thousands of highly skilled academics emigrating to the UK, Canada, and the US (IOM, 2024).

The security situation affecting education deteriorated. Following the 2014 abduction of 276 Chibok schoolgirls, over 1,680 schoolchildren were kidnapped during Buhari's eight-year tenure (Save the Children International, 2023; Ojo, 2025). Major abductions included 300 pupils from Damasak (2015), 110 from Dapchi (2018), 344 from Kankara (2020), and 279 from Jangebe (2021).

In September 2022, UNESCO revealed that out-of-school children in Nigeria had risen to approximately 20 million—the world's highest concentration—up from 10.5 million in 2014 (UNESCO, 2022). No Nigerian institution appeared in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2023 top 400, while South African institutions secured positions in the top 200–300.

The security comparison reveals a significant paradox, given Buhari's military background. Under Jonathan, while severe, the security challenge remained largely contained within the Northeast. By 2021, Bergstresser (2021) documented that over 13,000 citizens were killed by non-state actors annually—indicating the “precarious security situation had deteriorated even further.”

The geographical spread expanded. The North Central and Northwest zones became “hotspots of perpetual assaults,” with Benue and Plateau States experiencing systematic attacks (Collins & Chukwuemeka, 2024). The Benue State Emergency Management Agency reported over 1.5 million internally displaced persons by 2023 due to violent attacks (SEMA, 2023).

The Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) transitioned from guerrilla force to what Ojo (2025) terms a “techno-caliphate,” utilizing drones for surveillance and strikes against military Forward Operating Bases. According to Soufan Center (2025) estimates, ISWAP generated approximately \$191 million annually through local taxation—a figure that relies on modelling rather than direct financial data and should be treated with appropriate methodological caution—effectively establishing a parallel state in parts of Borno State and the Lake Chad Basin.

The decision to terminate the South African private military contractor STTEP's operations shortly after Buhari assumed office further illustrates the selectivity of the administration's security policy. Under President Jonathan, STTEP—hired to combat Boko Haram—had reportedly achieved significant tactical successes, with fewer than 30 contractors using advanced surveillance to identify insurgent enclaves and weapon caches (Guardian, 2015; Telegraph, 2015). During a House of Representatives plenary session on May 7, 2024, Hon. Ahmed Jaha, a representative from Borno State, testified that “the mercenaries were about to finish Boko Haram” during Jonathan's tenure, but “the new president (Muhammadu Buhari) was convinced, and he moved them out of the country” (TheCable, 2024). While Jaha's remarks reflect the perspective of a political actor from the affected region and should be treated as stakeholder testimony rather than independent evidence, the timing of the contract termination—immediately following the 2015 transition—is consistent with a pattern of reversing Jonathan-era security gains. The decision to disband a successful counter-insurgency operation, regardless of its controversial nature, arguably prolonged the conflict, requiring subsequent administrations to pursue alternative military partnerships, including those with Western powers, under terms that further entrenched dependency.

The economic consequences were severe. The Manufacturers Association of Nigeria reported members spent approximately ₦144.5 billion on alternative energy in 2022 alone—an 87% increase—necessitated by the near-collapse of the national grid (MAN, 2023). Farmers abandoned lands across “Food Basket” states, with 68% of households in conflict-affected areas reporting total abandonment of farmlands (Achanya & Luma, 2024).

Salawu et al. (2025) demonstrate that “insecurity has led to a disproportionate allocation of resources to defence, rising from \$16 billion in cumulative spending between 2008 and 2018 to ₦3.25 trillion in 2024 alone,” representing approximately 12% of the national budget. This creates a vicious cycle: persistent violence necessitates tripling military expenditures, diverting funds from human capital sectors.

The Paradox of Sustained Western Support

The pattern of sustained Western support during the Buhari years stands in contrast to the pressure applied to subsequent administrations. The \$500 million acquisition of A-29 Super Tucano aircraft from the United States exemplified a “calculated compromise” where Buhari accepted human rights deployment conditions in exchange for advanced weaponry (Dateline Nigeria, 2025). This cooperation proceeded uninterrupted despite the domestic death toll documented by Bergstresser (2021).

The P&ID arbitration scandal further illustrates institutional buffering. Although the fraudulent gas contract predated Buhari, his administration’s delayed response led to an initial \$11 billion award against Nigeria. Despite exposing “systemic weaknesses in Nigeria’s contractual governance,” Western judicial and financial institutions eventually provided the off-ramp, with the UK Supreme Court setting aside the award (White & Case, 2025).

However, Africa Confidential (2026) documented that as the security situation worsened, the administration increasingly sought military partnerships beyond the Anglo-American axis due to U.S. congressional holds on Cobra attack helicopters and intelligence-sharing reluctance. In response to Western “conditionality,” Nigeria secured defence agreements with Russia, China, Turkey, and the UAE.

Alternative explanations for sustained Western support must be considered. Diplomatic inertia—the tendency of foreign ministries to maintain existing relationships absent compelling reasons for rupture—may partially explain continuity. Counterterrorism cooperation priorities may have outweighed governance concerns in Western calculus. However, these explanations cannot fully account for the differential treatment: why the Jonathan administration, which faced arguably less severe security challenges, received critical distancing while the Buhari administration received sustained support despite more comprehensive failure.

The Tinubu Pivot and Western Response

The contemporary period has witnessed what Ojudu (2025) terms a “quiet pivot” in Nigeria’s foreign policy orientation under the Tinubu administration. Salimon (2025) catalogues specific policy moves that have been met with concern in Western capitals: joining BRICS as a partner country, rejecting Tesla’s mining proposal in favour of Chinese firms with mandatory local processing requirements, expanding currency swap deals with China, operationalizing the Dangote Refinery, signing nuclear energy cooperation with Russia’s Rosatom, and rejecting a proposed U.S. military base.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Yusuf Tuggar has reaffirmed Nigeria’s commitment to “pragmatic, interest-driven foreign policy” and “balanced relationships with all partners in a rapidly changing multipolar world,” cautioning against “the importation of external geopolitical rivalries into Africa” (Tuggar, 2025).

The Western response has been notable. Akbari (2025), writing for the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, analyses American rhetoric as “a clear attempt to redefine American influence in Africa and contain rival powers, especially Russia and China.” On Christmas Day 2025, US warships launched Tomahawk missile strikes against targets in Sokoto State (U.S. Africa Command, 2025; Adeyemi, 2025; Weiss, 2025)—strikes Zubairu (2025) argues targeted the Northwest strategically for its proximity to Niger and potential Russian presence, rather than for humanitarian reasons.

Buratai (2025) warns this approach may be counterproductive, potentially unifying Nigeria against a “common external aggressor” and propelling it “deeper into the strategic embrace of rivals like China and Russia.” Sowore (2026) offers a direct assessment: the American administration’s primary concern is “how to drive China out of the Nigerian market” rather than citizen welfare.

This pattern is consistent with the theoretical expectation that moves toward strategic autonomy may provoke Western hostility, while comprador administrations presiding over decline may receive sustained support, suggesting that containment rather than development remains a geopolitical imperative.

Conclusion

This study has examined the extent to which Nigeria’s comprehensive decline under Buhari (2015–2023) exhibits patterns consistent with comprador functionality rather than mere governance failure. The evidence across economic, educational, and security domains reveals a systematic reversal of pre-2015 gains, with the World Bank confirming a regression in per capita income to 1980s levels. The paradox of sustained Western support for an administration presiding over comprehensive decline, the study argues, becomes more intelligible when understood through the frameworks of dependency and compradorism: a weakened, indebted, internally preoccupied Nigeria may serve external interests by remaining a compliant peripheral state.

The integrated framework synthesizing dependency theory and the comprador state concept demonstrates analytical purchase on the Nigerian case. The pattern of Western engagement across three administrations—critical distancing from Jonathan’s growth-oriented administration, sustained support for Buhari’s declining state, and notable hostility toward Tinubu’s sovereignty-seeking pivot—suggests that external support correlates inversely with genuine autonomy. This finding contributes to broader theoretical debates about the mechanisms through which peripheral status is reproduced in the contemporary global political economy.

Several theoretical implications emerge from this analysis. First, the study demonstrates the continued relevance of dependency frameworks for understanding contemporary African political economy, particularly when integrated with agentic concepts like the comprador state. Second, it highlights the importance of distinguishing between structural outcomes and deliberate intent—a distinction that remains under-theorized in critical political economy scholarship. Third, it suggests that the concept of comprador functionality, rather than comprador conspiracy, may offer a more analytically precise framework for understanding how peripheral status is reproduced without requiring evidence of coordinated action.

The study's limitations suggest directions for future research. First, access to diplomatic archives and classified communications would enable more definitive analysis of Western intent versus structural outcome. Future research should examine declassified documents from the 2015 period as they become available. Second, comparative analysis across multiple African cases would establish whether the Nigerian pattern is exceptional or representative of broader dynamics in peripheral states that experience growth surges. Third, further research is needed on the mechanisms through which comprador interests are reproduced within state institutions, including analysis of elite educational trajectories, professional networks, and material interests.

The trajectory between 2011 and 2026 reveals a profound struggle between peripheralization and an emerging impulse toward strategic autonomy. Whether this impulse translates into sustained developmental transformation or is absorbed back into comprador arrangements remains an open question. Future research should track the Tinubu administration's foreign policy and economic reforms as they unfold, examining whether moves toward strategic autonomy yield measurable developmental outcomes or are themselves captured by competing elite interests.

Ultimately, this study suggests that understanding Nigeria's developmental trajectory requires attention to both domestic political economy and its embeddedness in global structures of power. The Buhari era represents not simply a period of governance failure but a moment in which the structural constraints of peripheral integration were starkly revealed. Whether subsequent administrations can navigate these constraints to achieve genuine developmental transformation remains a central question for Nigerian political economy and for the broader project of understanding how peripheral states can pursue sovereign development in the contemporary global order.

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